

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### Return to the nuclear agenda

*Political momentum is building in Germany for resuming nuclear power development.*

One legacy of the “green” decades of the 1970s and ’80s, which were often marked by violent controversies, is that essential aspects of economic and industrial policy have been kept on “hold” since reunification in October 1990. There have been moves, in view of the pro-nuclear commitment of the eastern German elites, to revive the strong impulse of the 1950s and early ’60s for nuclear power development and other national high-technology projects like space research and maglev train systems, but there has been a kind of consensus not to debate these issues in public.

The victory of Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s three-party coalition in the Oct. 16 elections for the national parliament, and the defeat of his radical, pro-ecologist challenger, Rudolf Scharping (a result that was not at all certain, as Kohl’s small margin of 10 seats indicates), means for the scientists and industries of the high-tech sectors that they now have a chance to help shape the agenda for the new government. Germany has to state its firm commitment to remain a member of the world’s club of leading industrial nations, or it won’t play an important role in the next century, despite its population of 80 million.

Some seem to be recognizing this. During the first week in November, for example, Germany’s national association of engineers (VDI) held a conference in Göttingen which, among other aspects, featured discussion of ways to secure the nuclear power sector into the next century, not just for Germany, but also to improve the safety of the former Soviet bloc’s

power plants.

At the VDI event, Prof. Rudolf Schulten, “father” of the pebble bed high-temperature reactor (HTR) technology, reiterated his call for replacing the technologically outdated nuclear fission plants that were built in the 1960s and ’70s, with the inherently safe reactor type that he has developed—of which, so far, only an underfunded experimental project exists at this time.

Schulten and other speakers warned that a German failure to build the HTR (the most-developed system in the world today) meant that its nuclear industry would be pushed aside on world markets by Asian competitors in the next century.

The same justified alarmism was evident at a seminar at the Evangelical Academy of Loccum in northern Germany last June. There, Dr. Friedrich Kienle of the German Power Engineering Industry Association stated that not only were the industrialized Asian countries “fairly unimpressed by ecologist views,” but that Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were committed to doubling their national nuclear power bases by the year 2010.

“The Asians are laughing about us . . . because of our problems,” Kienle said. “They don’t take us seriously anymore. And indeed, we cannot even tell them much anymore, because we are losing the edge in some of the most-advanced fields of the technology. In Taiwan, they’re already developing their own HTR technology. If things don’t change here, we will have to knock at Asia’s doors to ask for assistance in our nuclear

problems, since we won’t have enough engineers to manage our own nuclear power stations early next century.”

Kienle said that Asia is training an immense number of nuclear engineers and researchers, while in ecology-minded Germany, only the University of Aachen still dares to train such specialists. Germany won’t have the required number of experts to close down nuclear power plants in an orderly way by early next century, should it decide to abandon that technology, he said sarcastically.

The same argument arose in Göttingen, with special attention given to the opportunities offered for Germany’s nuclear power industry in the East. These potential markets would inevitably become a domain of Asian producers of nuclear technology, if the Germans continue their policy of benign disinterest. This is also clear for the Mideast, because Palestinian envoys have been stonewalled by institutions in Germany when trying to find support for building an electricity grid based on atomic power plants.

This affair documents that the equation “development is the new name for peace” still hasn’t been grasped by Germany’s leaders. A warning was issued at a conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in early November that “geopolitical conflicts” might arise because of shortages of energy early in the next century—shortages that will be inevitable if atomic power is not made available in time.

The IAEA warning was picked up: “The ‘Atoms for Peace’ program that was presented by U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his speech before the United Nations General Assembly in 1953 is now, with the end of the East-West conflict, again becoming a vision,” the economic daily *Handelsblatt* wrote on Nov. 7.